

Failed Leadership

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

For several weeks now I have been trying to explain, in as rational and balanced a way as I can, the tensions that exist in Israel over religious standards and the nuanced spectrum from rabid secular to fanatical religious. Of course, when one does that, both extremes complain that one is apologizing. And both extremes justify their positions in terms of survival. We who straddle both worlds then feel that the agenda in the media is being controlled by sensationalism and if only a balanced view would prevail it would help defuse the situation.

This is what is going on all the time over the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. There are two different narratives and goals. The discourse is dominated by the extremes who argue that their survival is the ultimate issue. Those of us who seek compromises are castigated for siding with enemies or understating the dangers.

The sides are so far apart that compromise seems unattainable. Extreme positions commandeer the media. I want to see a peaceful and fair resolution of all issues. But the more I see a one-sided campaign, the less I am inclined to criticize too aggressively. And as I see the abuses, they hurt and offend me. Yet on the ground and away from the grandstanding there is far more positive interaction than one might expect.

I have witnessed the secular religious struggle now for over 50 years—much of it firsthand, for I have taken part in demonstrations on both sides over the years since I first went to Israel to study as a teenager. The changes, as in every sphere of Israeli life, have been enormous, and mainly for the better. What prevents reconciliation is politics. Just as it does everywhere else where political rivalries clash on ideological issues such as abortion, gay rights, bankers, or trades unionists. Underlying every conflict is a political agenda in which both sides push and probe and see what they can get away with and how much they can gain. So you start demanding, insisting, wailing, and howling for the maximum, knowing you will probably have to settle for much less. And what suffers? The truth. It is this that lies at the root of my frustration with religious leadership in Israel or to be more accurate, the lack of it.

The Charedi, ultra-Orthodox leadership, and I mean of all shades and degrees, will not live up to its responsibility to stop extremist excess because it needs to show a united face to the secular politicians in order to stay in a coalition and get the money it wants. Wherever I look I see leadership so motivated by money that it has lost all moral authority. Even within its own ranks, most Charedi Jews now only pay lip service to the authorities they claim to revere.

I remember my Rosh Yeshivah in Mir threatening, in 1966, to excommunicate any one of his students who went to teach in any institution that taught anything

other than Torah. This meant that the whole Charedi education system was based exclusively on an intellectually rigorous Talmudic curriculum that was simply beyond the mental capabilities of at least half the population. But nothing was done to provide them with an alternative. By insisting that every single Charedi youngster stayed in yeshivah that focused on Talmud only regardless, of their mental capacities, thousands of youngsters were denied the opportunity to earn an honest living and provide for their families. No wonder a whole generation of dislocated, dysfunctional adults emerged. But the Charedi leadership had other priorities. It refused to acknowledge the problem and still overwhelmingly does.

After the summer's social demonstrations in Tel Aviv, Netanyahu set up the Trajtenberg Committee to make recommendations to deal with the increasing poverty gap in Israeli society. Their recommendations were brought to the cabinet for approval last week. Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg had called for the introduction of new incentives and training programs to increase employment rates among the ultra-Orthodox, but Charedi pressure in the Knesset made sure that these proposals were dropped.

Yet on the ground things are changing. Currently, 37% of Charedi men and 49% of Charedi women are employed. That's nowhere near enough, but it is a change and a trend despite the absence of support infrastructure and official education. Where there is a market demand there will always be ways found of meeting it.

But instead of government funding going to provide such infrastructure to the Charedi community, it will likely go instead where it will be appreciated, such as the Arab community. I'm glad the funds will be put to good use, but sad that the Charedi leadership is depriving its own faithful of desperately needed support.

Leadership that simply preserves the status quo is a failed leadership, like the old Soviet Communist Party. The reason Judaism survived the near cataclysmic challenge of Greco-Roman intellectual and military power was because the brilliant and gutsy rabbis of the era took innovative risks in repositioning the emphasis in Judaism from Temple ceremonial to the halls of study and prayer. That's leadership.

I understand why, in the wake of the Holocaust, the Charedi world put up the shutters and focused exclusively on study and refilling the wellsprings at all costs. The Chazon Ish was the giant of that process. But now, fifty years later, the current leadership is simply not tackling anywhere the problem of religious education, employment, and aggression.

Whenever leadership fails, the grassroots emerge. Charedi men and women are making up their own minds. Just as the Charedi ban on the internet has simply failed to stop increasing Charedi use of it, so now the development of new forms of Charedi education are beginning to appear. Let me give you one example.

There is a small yeshivah in the Negev town of Ofakim, largely neglected by the big guns of either the secular or the religious nomenklatura. Most of its

inhabitants are poorer Sephardi families. Many years ago brilliant scholars of Mir Yeshivah retired to obscurity in Ofakim to study, a sort of modern-day hermit, except in Torah you carry your family and all its baggage with you. Accidentally, an old-fashioned Ashkenazi Charedi Yeshivah called Mishkan HaTalmud started up. Again quite accidentally, a dedicated, sincere, saintly rabbi by the name of Rav David Shek found himself pressganged into taking over. With hardly enough funds to keep himself and his family alive, he has kept the yeshivah going. But here's the point. Of his own initiative, when he saw that some children had learning difficulties, he brought in professional consultants and educational advisors to test them and help him decide on the best way of educating them. It is only sad that he is hardly known and he has to spend so much time travelling the world to raise money to keep his institution alive.

Now that is a model of genuine education, which blends tradition with modernity, that is springing up all over Israel nowadays in isolated communities where Charedi families go to find somewhere to live and to contribute to Israeli society. I am inclined to compare them to the Dead Sea sects who withdrew from the turmoil and corruption of Jerusalem 2000 years ago to live a purer life in the desert. This trend has been going on for many years. Rav Grossman of Migdal HaEmek is probably the best known of all as a Charedi man who built up a community in a neglected backwater. But there are many, many more like him.

After I first wrote this piece I read that the Beth Din of the Ultra Orthodox Eydah Charedis in Jerusalem has instructed its followers not to cooperate with the police in bringing the violent thugs who attacked women and children to justice. Once again I am thrown back into a state of disgust and shame. How can any genuinely religious person accept this kind of "leadership"?

Thank goodness for the ordinary dedicated religious men and women who are doing their bit to spread a brand of the Jewish religion that is spiritual, caring, sensitive, and idealistic, rather than aggressively and arrogantly oppressive and regressive. As Hillel once said, "In a place where there are no men, you strive to be a man."